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ABSTRACT

Eight to twelve year old children are at an ideal age in terms of influencing moral development because of the cognitive and social changes they go through at this stage. Their interest in group activities makes team sports attractive. It is important to determine whether competition in athletic programs detracts from moral behavior. If it does, then those who run athletic programs, whether in schools or community agencies, need to be educated to develop better ways of influencing moral behavior. Parents must participate as well because it will be difficult to rectify some of the problems created by the "win-at-all-costs" attitude if parents' attitudes do not change. Although much research has been done on moral development in children, particularly by Kohlberg and Piaget, little research has been done on moral education and athletic competition. Nor do we know whether moral education programs would be successful. Nevertheless, change is clearly needed to correct the current situation in which competition and moral behavior are seen as antithetical. (CD)

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MORAL BEHAVIOR OF CHILDREN PARTICIPATING IN COMPETITIVE ATHLETICS

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MORAL BEHAVIOR OF CHILDREN PARTICIPATING IN COMPETITIVE ATHLETICS

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A recent emphasis, or maybe reemphasis is the better term, on moral education has come about as a result of many changes in the structure of our society. There are some who equate modern American life to the last days of a decadent Roman Empire, while others see the demands of modern society calling for new ways of viewing social and moral problems. Be that as it may, at the present time there is almost no facet of life that is not experiencing some change in value systems and moral behavior. Competitive athletics for children, the topic of this paper, is one of those areas in our lives that is being affected by these changes in value systems. Competitive athletics have become more of an integral part of society than ever before, due in part to the proliferation of information on athletic contests via television. They seem to possess a tremendous potential as a vehicle for assisting, supplementing, and contributing to the development of moral values in children.

Moral education as it may be applied to competetive athletics is an illusive concept, and although it completes the spectrum of topics selected for the symposium, it may not obtain the degree of closure that the other presentations offer. The empirical base and research underpinnings dealing with moral education

and its relationship to competitive athletics are not extensive. Therefore, the thrust of this paper is more a summary of various views and points for consideration.

Even such a noted author as Pulitzer Prize Winner James Michner (1975) has written about "The Jungle World of Juvenile Sports," and millions of people have viewed programs dealing with other aspects of athletics for youngsters such as a recent segment of the CBS 60 Minutes Program dealing with football. Such an emphasis by the media and noted authors may do more to bring about changes in the approach to athletics for children than the efforts that have been made by parents and educators. The general approach of the presentations mentioned is to question whether or not the values and moral behavior fostered by programs of competitive athletics for children are making a positive contribution in the lives of the participants. The conclusion, based on the evidence collected and/or views expressed, is that the programs are not equipping children with a set of moral behaviors that will be of long-range benefit to the individual or society. The assumption that this viewpoint is a valid one will be basic to this paper.

The total range of athletic competition for children is quite extensive both in the types of competitive activities in which children engage, and the varieties of children at many age levels that participate. Therefore, the aspects of moral behavior relating to athletics will be limited in this paper to those athletic activities commonly engaged in by children in the 8-12 year old category. This scope of activities involves competition in the popular team sports such as football, basketball, and baseball

and to some extent the individual and dual sports like tennis and golf. In addition to an age limitation of from 8-12, it is also useful to limit the discussion to the popular team sports and leave the variety of individual activities a child may engage in for another time. Another limiting aspect of the team sport activities designed for the 8-12 year olds is that most of the programs were originally set up for male participants alone. Recently these programs and activities have made efforts to include female participants. An example is the inclusion of girls on little league baseball teams. In addition to integrating the leagues for the sexes, which is more recent, most team sports have established separate leagues for female participants in basketball and "powder puff" football. This recent development of including girls in the previously all-male activities presents some problems when trying to interpret past events. Also, since most of our experiences have been with all-male activities it is difficult to make judgments about future events. Most of the available evidence in the form of research results and subjective opinions have been formulated with the traditional all-male systems. We have now delimited the scope and are focusing on 8-12 year old boys and girls engaged in team sports. The relationship between athletic competition and moral behavior can now be examined. This relationship between the two areas will be considered by asking three questions and then trying to provide sufficient evidence to formulate at least partial answers.

The first question that can be asked is: CAN MORAL BEHAVIOR OF CHILDREN PARTICIPATING IN COMPETITIVE ATHLETICS BE INFLUENCED?

In answering this question we need to turn our attention to some theoretical positions that describe moral development in children. Many theoretical models have been proposed, but the cognitively-based model for moral development formulated by Piaget (1948) in which individuals move through several developmental stages offers promise for our discussion. Piaget's model often cited in the literature, is acknowledged by many authors writing in the area of moral development and moral education as having much merit. A similar model, also cognitively-base, has been proposed by Kohlberg (1964, 1966, 1975) in which the development of moral behavior is regarded as a six step sequence in the life of the individual. These six stages, as proposed by Kohlberg, are considered irreverseable, and once a particular level has been achieved, a person cannot revert back to a lower level in the hierarchy. Both the models of Piaget and Kohlberg are appropriate for a discussion about influencing the moral behavior of 8-12 year old children. Both theorists indicate that the 8-12 age group (approximately 3rd through 6th grade) is the age level during which a rapid change in moral behavior is most likely to take place. This age group is also characterized by an affinity for group or gang activities that takes place before puberty. It should be stated that there are no magic cutoffs at age 8 or 12, and individuals will vary considerably in moral development at all ages just as they do in physical and other aspects of development. This still does not preclude the fact that, in general, the age group from 8-12 is the most ameniable to influences on moral behavior. Another

feature of this developmental stage is that the problem of sex differences is not as pronounced as it is for older age groups.

If we accept the cognitively-based models proposed by Piaget and Kohlberg as a basis for planned intervention by adults to influence moral behavior, the answer to the first question proposed by this paper is an unqualified "yes". It would seem that this age group from 8-12 offers the greatest potential for influence from a theoretical point of view, and that competitive athletics can provide the vehicle for that influence.

A second question that can now be asked is: HOW DO WE GO ABOUT INFLUENCING THE MORAL BEHAVIOR OF 8-12 YEAR OLD BOYS AND GIRLS?

At this point, before looking at possibilities for influencing the moral behavior of children, we first need to define what we mean by "moral behavior", and this is a most difficult task. Operational definitions are too specific, and general approaches may be too broad to be of use. Still, a more general definition may be preferred when stated as a moral philosophy. Basically, what we can cite as our moral philosophy is: "that philosophy which would form the basis for the moral behavior of people and nations in Western civilization." This philosophy focuses on the effect that a person's actions have on others in society. This philosophical stance proposes that every individual has a right to his own existance and his right in not to be infringed upon by other members of society (Williams and Williams, 1970). Again, this is not an operational definition, but this is not a research study. This broad definition leaves open the possibility

of many interpretations and a wide variety of specific methods by which the moral behavior of children may be influenced.

Before we can consider how we can influence the moral behavior of children engaged in competitive athletics we need to determine the nature of the group or individuals that might be responsible for administering programs of competitive athletics. The very idea of moral education would seem to indicate that the school should be involved since it fills the role of a tax supported agency responsible for education. In reality, most competitive athletic programs for children in the 8-12 year range are administered by agencies or groups outside of the school's jurisdiction. There are many combinations of sponsoring groups such as city recreation departments and private organizations who use school facilities but are not under direct administrative control of the school. The agencies themselves are responsible for the manner in which programs are conducted. Other programs are completely independent of the schools with their own administrative organizations, facilities, personnel and sources of operating funds. This initial problem of the control of the athletic program needs to be confronted before any program for influencing moral behavior can be developed. Influencing moral behavior may be a job that the school can do best if they are in charge of the competitive athletic programs. However, most programs are not under control of a school, and a major shift in emphasis might be needed in the approach to competitive athletics as fostered by a variety of agencies and organizations. Such an emphasis might be in the nature of an educational program on influencing moral behavior for coaches, directors, and other

individuals concerned with the athletic activities. Furthermore, since parents are the ultimate controlling force behind most of the athletic programs, it would take a similar education program in moral development and moral behavior to make inroads into changing the attitudes of parents. The last, and most important consideration, is whether or not parents wish to promote a change in behavior in regard to competitive athletics. It may well be that parents consider what goes on in some competitive athletic programs for children as a sufficient level of moral behavior on the part of all concerned.

Consideration of the nature of the program to be used to influence moral behavior in competitive athletics is as much of a task as trying to decide what organizations or individuals should implement and be responsible for such a program. Information on moral education is quite prevalent in the professional literature of the behavioral sciences dating back to Hartshone and May (1928) whose findings indicated something of the specific nature of moral behavior. Many authors have written about moral education in other countries. Kay (1975) considers it from the British standpoint while Bronfenbrenner (1962) has reported on the Russian approach to moral education. Even with such a large body of information available on moral behavior and moral education, little research has been done that examines the relationship between moral behavior and competitive athletics. A great deal of research has been conducted on moral behavior and related altruistic behavior (Krebs, 1970). Human subjects of all ages and even albino rats have been investigated, but little evidence has been produced related to situations that might be found in a competitive athletic program.

A recent study by Jantz (1975), looking at moral behavior in the context of athletics, may herald the start of some significant attempts at research in this area.

It would seem that sufficient information is available about moral development and moral education to be able to formulate a program for influencing moral behavior in competitive athletics even though there is a lack of research data. However, until it is decided who will implement a program of this type, and more important, whether or not it is wanted in the first place, little progress can be made.

The third and final question to be asked concerning the moral behavior of children in competitive athletics is:
IF A PROGRAM IS ESTABLISHED FOR PROMOTING MORAL BEHAVIOR IN COMPETITIVE ATHLETICS FOR CHILDREN, WHAT ARE THE POSSIBILITIES FOR ITS SUCCESS?

It seems that with the many obstacles in the path of establishing a program designed to promote moral behavior, it is doubtful that a sustained effort by a large group of interested individuals and groups would be possible. Most of the past efforts for establishing moral education programs have been aimed at school-centered, in-classroom situations. Success of these programs is still not at a high level of predictability. General, large scale programs that do not take into account individual differences and individual modes of learning may be doomed to failure.

An even bigger consideration is whether or not competitive athletics is the type of situation that lends itself to promoting

moral behavior. Some research evidence such as a recent study by Barnett and Bryan (1974), indicates that competition may actually produce a reduction in altruistic or moral behavior. It is entirely possible, and indeed logical to consider, that the two ideas of competition and moral behavior are indeed contradictory. This means that unless cooperative behavior is encouraged, moral behavior may not be improved. The answer to the third question is that we don't have enough evidence to be able to determine whether or not a program to influence moral behavior in competitive athletics would be successful.

Many people would attest to the fact that moral behavior and character development are salient characteristics of competitive athletic programs for children, and that nothing needs to be changed. If this were true, why the hue and cry about the emphasis on winning at all costs and some of the other undesirable features that occur in some present-day competitive athletic programs for children. It would seem that some changes are in order. Indeed, it has been a basic assumption of this paper that change is needed. In order to aid in the making of these necessary changes, this paper has tried to shed light on the possibility of establishing a program to promote moral behavior in programs of competitive athletics for children 8-12 years of age. The problems that have been considered are difficult ones to overcome and will require considerable insight and effort before solutions can be established..Research efforts in this area need to be initiated and broadened; preliminary attempts at trial programs

need to be implemented; but most important of all, we as educators and parents need to decide whether or not we want changes. If we indeed desire changes, efforts must be started soon before the doomsday prophets are proven to be correct.

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